THE
Dark
Issue 1
GUTTER SERENADES

An Ovi Publication

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editorial

Welcome to the first issue of Ovi Dark.

Every story begins with a shadow. Sometimes it's the shadow behind a door. Sometimes it's the whisper you hear when the street is empty at midnight. And sometimes it's the part of ourselves we prefer not to examine too closely. Ovi Dark exists for those shadows.

As the newest member of the growing family of Ovi eMagazines, this publication was created with one purpose, to celebrate the strange, the thrilling and the mysterious corners of pulp fiction. Here you will find detectives chasing impossible clues through rain-soaked cities, explorers discovering secrets best left buried, travellers wandering through places where reality bends in unsettling ways and ordinary people who suddenly find themselves standing at the edge of something… darker.

Pulp fiction has always been a literature of imagination and momentum. It is bold, fast, atmospheric and unapologetically entertaining. It invites readers to escape the ordinary and step into worlds where danger lurks in every alleyway and every decision carries weight. At Ovi Dark, we embrace that tradition wholeheartedly.

But pulp is not only about action and suspense. It is also about mood, the crackling tension before the storm, the eerie silence in a forgotten corridor, the quiet realization that something is terribly wrong. The stories in this magazine explore that atmosphere of unease, that thin boundary between curiosity and dread.

In every issue, you will meet new writers, unexpected ideas and stories that linger long after the final line. You will also encounter with true crime stories and real criminals in special columns.

So dim the lights. Turn the page. And step with us into the dark.

This is only the beginning. ■

Thanos Kalamidas

We cover every issue
for 22 years
The Ovi
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In the back alleys and dimly lit dives where morality goes to die, these stories stake their claim. Here, the world is rendered in stark contrast, the blinding flash of a muzzle, the deep shadow of a fedora's brim, the crimson stain spreading across a charcoal suit. This is the realm of the fatalistic and the fallen, where the dame is always trouble, the scheme is never clean and the hero is merely the last man standing. Driven by desperation and the promise of one big score, these tales unspool with the relentless rhythm of rain on a windowpane.

Welcome.

The verdict is already in: nobody walks away clean.

The Ovi Dark eMagazine

Pulp Fiction Short Stories
March 2026

Issue 01

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Pulp fiction literature refers to inexpensive magazines and novels, printed on cheap "pulp" paper, popular from the 1890s to the 1950s. These works featured sensational, fast-paced stories, hardboiled crime, sci-fi, horror, and romance, aimed at mass entertainment. Though dismissed as low art, pulp forged enduring archetypes (like the lone detective) and influenced film noir, comics, and writers like Raymond Chandler.

Ovi Thematic/Dark/ History eMagazines Publications 2026

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PARKING

The broken meter blues
By Regan O'Sullivan

The parking meter stood there like a rusted sentinel of injustice, its face blank, its coin slot grinning like a crooked cop. Mei-Ling Chen leaned against it, arms crossed, her smirk wider than a getaway car's tire marks.

"Broken meter," she announced to the first victim, a sweaty businessman juggling a briefcase and a latte. "That'll be a twenty-dollar fine. Cash only. No receipts."

The man blinked. "Since when do you work for the city?"

"Since the city decided not to pay me enough to care," Mei-Ling said, tapping the meter. "Listen. No click. No tick. Broken. That's a violation of… something. Pay up or I key your Lexus."

The businessman hesitated. Mei-Ling pulled out a switchblade, pink, bedazzled, very threatening. He forked over the cash.

Score one for the Meter Maiden.

* * * * * * * * * *

This was Mei-Ling's genius. Find a busted meter. Stand there like authority. Collect "fines." No permits. No paperwork. Just pure, unadulterated chutzpah with a side of plausible deniability.

"You're a criminal," her best friend Rico had told her over tequila last night.

"I'm an entrepreneur," Mei-Ling corrected. "The city's too lazy to fix their meters. I'm providing a service. Fear-based customer relations."

Now, three hours into her shift, her pockets jingled like a slot machine payout. Then... disaster.

A cop car rolled up.

Not just any cop. Officer Brickowski. A man so dense, light bent around him.

"You," Brickowski growled, stepping out like a fridge with legs. "You the meter maid?"

Mei-Ling didn't miss a beat. "Volunteer. Community service. Badge got stolen by a gang of raccoons. Tragic."

Brickowski squinted. "I don't like you."

"I don't like me either, but here we are."

* * * * * * * * * *

Brickowski reached for his cuffs. Mei-Ling reached for her emergency plan, a smoke bomb made from crushed-up sidewalk chalk and regret.

POOF.

The street turned into a low-budget action scene. Mei-Ling bolted, cash flying like confetti at a mobster's funeral. Brickowski lumbered after her, knocking over a hot dog cart ("MY CABBAGE!" screamed the vendor).

She vaulted over a parked motorcycle, slid across a hood, and...

WHAM.

Face-first into Rico, who was

conveniently stealing a bike.

"Get on!" he yelled.

"I hate you!" she yelled back, hopping on.

Brickowski roared, "STOP OR I'LL..."

"YOU'LL WHAT? THINK HARDER?!" Mei-Ling shouted as they peeled off.

* * * * * * * * * *

Back at Rico's "office" (a laundromat with a suspiciously clean money operation), Mei-Ling dumped her haul. "We're rich!"

Rico frowned. "We're idiots."

"Same thing."

Then, the door burst open.

Not Brickowski.

Worse.

The actual meter maid union.

A dozen angry women in neon vests, wielding ticket rolls like nunchucks.

"You've been impersonating city employees," their leader hissed. "That's our grift."

Mei-Ling sighed. "Well, crap."

* * * * * * * * * *

What followed wasn't a fight.

It was a negotiation.

Ten minutes later, Mei-Ling and Rico walked out ...alive, unharmed, and newly inducted into the Meter Maid Mafia.

"Fifty percent cut," Rico muttered. "We're basically public servants now."

Mei-Ling lit a cigarette. "Worst. Heist. Ever."

But as they strolled into the sunset, pockets lighter but futures brighter, one thing was clear, crime paid.

Just not as much as bureaucracy. ■

THE END

The double-cross vault
By Jennifer Stephenson

The world, in my experience, is divided into two kinds of people, those who take a straight line to a problem and those who take the scenic route, usually through someone else's wallet. I was parked in the latter camp, nursing a lukewarm tea from a thermos and watching the rain slick the cobblestones of a Wapping back-alley. The job was simple. Too simple. That should have been the first clue.

The vault was in the basement of a shabby import-export front, the kind of place that smelled of damp rot and forgotten ledgers. The safe inside was a beauty, a Mosler from the '50s, all polished steel and intricate brass. A sleeping dragon. Scott Pearson, ex-Met, ex-husband, full-time envoy to the underworld, was there to whisper it awake.

My driver, a wiry kid named Billy with eyes that never stayed still, was jangling the keys in his pocket. "How much longer, Scotty? This place gives me the creeps."

"Patience, son. A Mosler isn't a tin of biscuits. You have to court it." I laid my ear against the cold met-

al, my fingers turning the dial with a touch softer than a lover's. It was the only thing in my life that still responded to a gentle approach.

"Court it? We're on a clock. Alarm's set for 5 AM. It's 4:30."

"I'm aware of the time, Billy." The final tumbler fell with a satisfying thunk. I gripped the handle. "See? All about the touch."

I swung the heavy door open. Inside, nestled on a velvet-lined shelf, was the prize: the Falconwood Diamond, a blue-white stone the size of a pigeon's egg that could blind a man with its history of blood and betrayal.

Billy was at my shoulder, breathing fast. "Blimey. That's it?"

"That's it." I reached in, but my eye caught something else. A small, grey brick of plastique, wired to a digital timer. The red numbers glowed in the gloom: 00:04:59... 00:04:58...

It wasn't part of the plan.

Billy took a sharp step back. "What's that?"

"That, my boy," I said, my voice dangerously calm, "is the uninvited guest at the party." I turned slowly. Billy wasn't looking at the bomb. He was looking at me, and the fear in his eyes had been replaced by a flat, cold calculation.

"The alarm..." he whispered.

"Is a feint," I finished for him. "The real trigger is right here. Set to give you just enough time to get clear and leave me holding the bag. Or rather, holding the vault."

He backed away another step, towards the stairs. "I'm sorry, Scotty. They made me an offer. A one-way ticket out of this mess. You're the mess."

The pieces clicked into place with a sound louder than the Mosler's tumblers. My client, a slick piece of work named Landis, wanted the diamond. But he wanted the notorious Scott Pearson, the sleuth who solved crimes among criminals, out of the picture even more. I knew too many of his secrets. This was a tidy solution.

"Billy," I said, my voice low and steady, the way I used to talk to jumpers on a ledge. "You drive off now, you're not just leaving a man to die. You're signing your own death warrant. Landis doesn't leave loose ends. You're the loosest end of all."

His hand was on the iron railing. "You're wrong."

00:03:15...

"I'm rarely wrong about this sort of thing. It's a character flaw." I took a step forward, not threatening, just closing the space. "He told you to park around the corner, didn't he? Told you the engine had to be running. For a quick getaway."

His twitch confirmed it.

"He'll be in that car, Billy. Or one of his boys will be. You get in, he puts one in your ear, drives off into the sunrise. Two problems solved."

"You're lying!" he spat, but the bravado was cracking.

00:02:30...

"I don't have the energy to lie anymore, son. It's the one luxury a man my age can afford." I gestured to the bomb. "We can stand here and debate my veracity until we're both wallpaper, or you can make a choice. Trust the man who just paid you to be his coffin nail, or trust the man you were supposed to bury."

The rain drummed a frantic rhythm on the street above. Billy's knuckles were white on the railing. He was a kid, stupid and greedy, but not evil. Not yet. The clock ticked down. In his eyes, I saw the internal war, the easy money versus the hard truth.

00:01:45...

He let out a strangled sound, part sob, part curse. "What do we do?"

A grim smile touched my lips. "First," I said, moving back to the vault. "You're going to help me with this bomb. And then, you and me are going to have a very serious chat with Mr. Landis about the terms of our employment."

The real heist was just beginning.

* * * * * * * * * *

The rain had settled into a persistent, grimy drizzle by the time I shoved Billy into the passenger seat of my own car, a mud-spattered Jaguar that had seen better decades. The plastique was nestled in the boot, timer disconnected. My hands didn't shake. They never do when the anger is cold enough.

"Right," I said, sliding behind the wheel. "Where's the meet?"

Billy, pale and trembling, stammered, "The old Granary. Dockside. He said he'd be in a black Mercedes."

"Of course he did." I cranked the engine. "Originality is dead." I pulled out into the slick, predawn streets, the tyres hissing

on the wet tarmac. London was a sleeping beast, its breath fogging the windows.

"You really think he'll be there?" Billy asked, his voice small.

"I know he will. He'll want to see the fireworks. Or at least, get confirmation from the horse's mouth that the horse is glue." I glanced at him. "You still have the piece he gave you?"

Billy nodded, patting his jacket pocket.

"Good. When we get there, you'll do exactly as I say. Your life, and my continued employment, depend on it."

The Granary was a hulking silhouette against the gunmetal grey of the Thames. Warehouses loomed like tombstones. And there, parked under a lone,

flickering sodium light, was the Mercedes. Right on cue.

I killed the engine and lights, coasting to a stop a hundred yards away. "Okay, Billy. Showtime. You walk over. You tell him it's done. You tell him I'm vault-paste. You get your money."

"And then?"

"And then he'll probably try to kill you. That's when you dive for cover."

His eyes widened. "What are you going to do?"

"Me?" I opened my door. "I'm going to

have a word with my employer about breach of contract."

I slipped into the shadows of the warehouses, a ghost in a worn trench coat. Billy, to his credit, walked towards the light with a semblance of a swagger. The Mercedes window slid down. I saw Landis's profile, sharp and predatory.

Billy talked, gesturing back towards the city. Landis listened, then nodded. He reached into his coat. Not for an envelope.

I was already moving.

Billy saw it too, throwing himself to the ground as Landis's arm came up, a pistol gleaming dully. The shot was loud, a flat crack that echoed between the brick canyons. It went wide.

I came up on the passenger side, yanking the door open. A big man with a neck thicker than his head was sitting there. He grunted in surprise.

"Evening," I said, and introduced his forehead to the butt of my own revolver. He slumped.

Landis spun in the driver's seat, the gun swinging towards me. His eyes were wide with shock. "Pearson!"

"Disappointed?" I levelled the gun at his face. "The help is notoriously unreliable these days. Now, drop it. Let's talk about severance pay."

He hesitated, calculating the odds. The rain pattered on the car roof.

"I paid you to do a job," he snarled.

"You paid me to retrieve a diamond. You didn't pay for the extra service of being blown to smithereens. That's a separate invoice. And I'm adding a surcharge for emotional distress."

Billy scrambled to his feet, brushing mud off his knees, his own cheap pistol now pointed shakily at Landis.

Landis's shoulders slumped. He let the gun clatter to the footwell. "It was just business, Scott."

"It always is," I said. "Until it becomes personal." I reached in, took the keys from the ignition, and pocketed them. "Now, here's what's going to happen. You're going to give Billy his money. All of it. Then, you're going to get out of this lovely car and take a long walk."

"And if I don't?"

I leaned in closer, the smell of his expensive cologne making my nose itch. "Then I call a few old friends in the Met. And I give them the Falconwood Diamond, along with a very detailed statement about how I recovered it from your vault after you tried to murder me. You'll spend the rest of your days in a box even smaller than that Mosler."

He knew I had him. The diamond was the one thing he couldn't explain. Defeat washed over him. He pulled a thick envelope from his inside pocket and tossed it to Billy. "Get in the car, Scott," he said, his voice hollow. "We can work this out. A partnership."

"I had a partner," I said, straightening up. "She took the house in Chelsea. I'm not looking for another."

I nodded to Billy. We backed away, leaving Landis standing in the rain, a man without a car or a future. We got into the Jag.

Billy clutched the envelope like a life raft. "What now?"

"Now?" I started the engine. "Now I drive you to the station. You take the first train to anywhere that isn't here. You take that money, you get a real job, and you forget you ever heard the name Scott Pearson."

"And you?"

"I," I said, pulling away from the crumbling docks, the diamond a heavy, secret weight in my pocket, "am going to go home, pour a very large whisky, and listen to the rain. Business as usual." ■

The End

Axeman of New Orleans

The Axeman of New Orleans remains one of the most mysterious and chilling figures in American criminal history. Active between 1918 and 1919, the unidentified killer terrorized the city of New Orleans, leaving behind a trail of brutal murders and a legend that still fascinates historians and crime enthusiasts. Despite investigations by police and national media attention, the identity of the Axeman has never been conclusively proven.

The Beginning of the Murders

The first widely recognized attack occurred in May 1918, when Italian grocer Joseph Maggio and his wife Catherine Maggio were found murdered in their home. Their throats had been slashed with a razor, and the killer had used an axe belonging to the victims. The weapon was discovered nearby, a detail that would become a disturbing pattern in the Axeman's crimes.

Investigators quickly noticed something unusual: the murderer rarely brought his own weapon. Instead, he typically used axes or hatchets found inside the victims' homes. Entry was usually gained by removing a

panel from the back door rather than breaking windows or forcing locks.

Over the next year, a series of attacks struck mostly Italian-American families, leading some investigators to suspect a vendetta or organized crime involvement. However, no clear motive ever emerged.

A City Living in Fear

The killings created widespread panic throughout New Orleans. Families slept with weapons nearby, and rumors spread quickly across the city's neighborhoods.

One of the most horrifying attacks occurred in June 1918, when grocer Louis Besumer and his mistress Anna Lowe were assaulted in their home. Both survived initially, though Lowe later died from complications. Besumer accused others of involvement before eventually recovering, leaving investigators confused and no closer to identifying the killer.

Another shocking case happened in August 1918, when Joseph Romano, an elderly Italian immigrant, was found brutally attacked in his home. Romano died from his injuries, further deepening the terror gripping the city.

These attacks followed similar patterns:

- Entry through a removed door panel
- Use of an axe or hatchet found inside the home
- Brutal blows to the head
- Victims often Italian grocers or shopkeepers

Police struggled to find fingerprints or witnesses, and the killer seemed to vanish into the night each time.

The Infamous Letter

The Axeman became truly legendary in March 1919, when a letter supposedly written by the killer was sent to a newspaper in New Orleans. The letter

was published in the The Times-Picayune, sending the city into a frenzy.

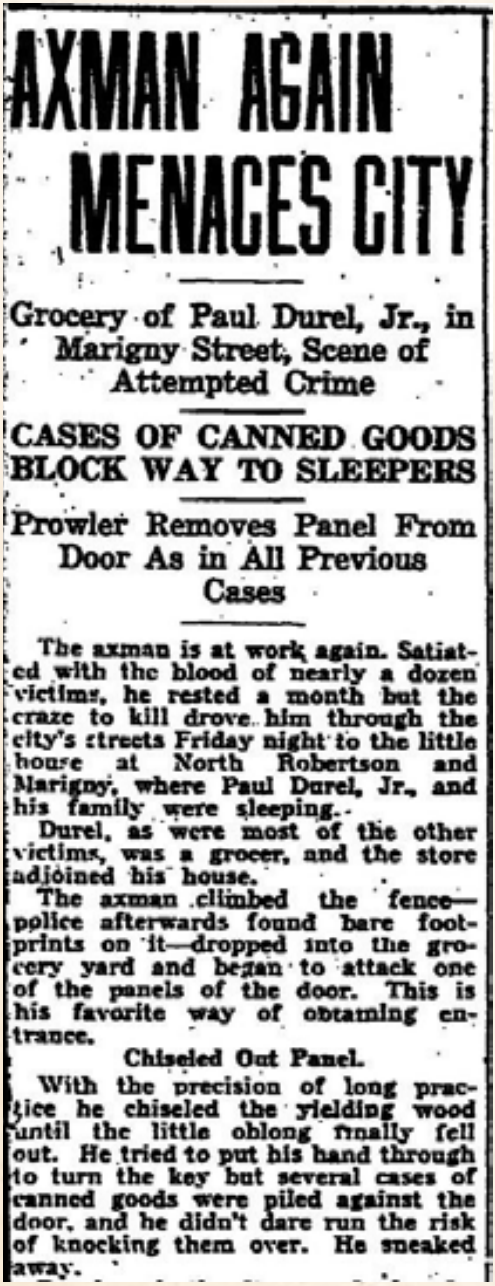
In the message, the writer claimed to be a demon from hell and warned that he would strike again on a specific night. However, he added a strange condition:

Anyone playing jazz music loudly in their home would be spared.

At the time, jazz was rapidly growing in popularity in New Orleans, home to legendary musicians like Louis Armstrong.

On the night mentioned in the letter, the entire city erupted in music. Jazz bands performed in homes, bars, dance halls, and even on street corners. People kept their windows open so the music could be heard outside.

That night, no Axeman attacks occurred.



AXMAN AGAIN MENACES CITY

Grocery of Paul Durel, Jr., in Marigny Street, Scene of Attempted Crime

CASES OF CANNED GOODS BLOCK WAY TO SLEEPERS

Prowler Removes Panel From Door As in All Previous Cases

The axman is at work again. Satiated with the blood of nearly a dozen victims, he rested a month but the craze to kill drove him through the city's streets Friday night to the little house at North Robertson and Marigny, where Paul Durel, Jr., and his family were sleeping.

Durel, as were most of the other victims, was a grocer, and the store adjoined his house.

The axman climbed the fence—police afterwards found bare footprints on it—dropped into the grocery yard and began to attack one of the panels of the door. This is his favorite way of obtaining entrance.

Chiseled Out Panel.

With the precision of long practice he chiseled the yielding wood until the little oblong finally fell out. He tried to put his hand through to turn the key but several cases of canned goods were piled against the door, and he didn't dare run the risk of knocking them over. He sneaked away.

Whether the letter was genuine or simply a hoax remains one of the greatest mysteries surrounding the case.

The Last Known Attack

The final widely accepted Axeman attack took place in October 1919. Victim Mike Pepitone was murdered in his home while his wife had briefly stepped out. She returned to find him fatally injured from axe blows.

Shortly after this murder, the Axeman seemingly disappeared. No confirmed attacks matching the same pattern occurred again.

Suspects and Theories

Over the decades, several suspects have been proposed.

One theory pointed toward Frank Mumphrey, a violent criminal who murdered several women in 1920 and whose methods resembled aspects of the Axeman's attacks. However, evidence connecting him directly to the earlier murders remains weak.

Another theory suggested that the killer might have been involved in organized crime disputes within New Orleans' Italian community, possibly related to extortion or gang rivalry.

Some historians even believe multiple attackers may have been responsible for the crimes, which could explain inconsistencies between cases.

Despite numerous theories, no one was ever officially charged.

The Axeman's Legacy

More than a century later, the Axeman of New Orleans remains one of America's most famous unsolved serial killer cases. The mystery continues to inspire books, documentaries, and works of fiction.

The strange connection between the killer and jazz culture also helped cement the legend in popular imagination. In fact, a song titled The Mysterious

Axman's Jazz (Don't Scare Me Papa) was released during the panic, capitalizing on the public's fascination with the story.

Today, the Axeman is remembered as a symbol of early 20th-century urban fear, an unknown figure who slipped through the cracks of early forensic investigation.

Even with modern research and renewed interest, the question remains unanswered:

Who was the Axeman of New Orleans?

The truth may still be buried somewhere in the history of the city he once terrorized. ■

***Ms. Wilma Lindholm**, a widow in her mid-70s and a retired nurse, is well-known in the town of Högafors for her sharp wit, biting sarcasm, and relentless gossip. She has a knack for uncovering and often exaggerating, local problems and crimes, earning her a reputation as both a troublemaker and an unlikely watchdog.*

The beginnings

The small, picturesque town of Högafors was draped in the golden hues of autumn when the trouble began. The crisp air carried the scent of burning leaves and freshly baked cinnamon buns from Frida's Bakery, a scent usually associated with peace. But peace was the last thing on Ms. Wilma Lindholm's mind as she marched down the cobbled street, her sharp blue eyes scanning for scandal like a hawk circling prey.

At 75, Wilma was a force of nature, a retired nurse with a tongue like a scalpel and a mind that missed nothing. She wore her silver hair in a tight bun, as if to keep her thoughts from escaping prematurely, and her cardigan pockets were always stuffed with knitting needles and half-finished mittens "for the church bazaar," she'd say, though everyone knew they were just props for eavesdropping.

Today, however, her needles were still. She had bigger prey than idle gossip.

* * * * *

It was young Elin who found him, Mr. Bergström, the miserly landlord, sprawled behind Frida's counter, his face an unnatural shade of purple, a half-eaten kanelbulle clutched in his stiff fingers.

"Poison," Wilma declared before the police even arrived, sniffing the air like a bloodhound. "And badly done, too. Amateur."

Inspector Nils Andersson, a weary man in his fifties who had long since learned to dread Wilma's "help," sighed. "Ms. Lindholm, please. Let us handle this."

"Handle it?" She scoffed. "You couldn't handle a grocery list without me double-checking it."

The small crowd that had gathered murmured in amusement. Nils pinched the bridge of his nose.

Wilma leaned in, lowering her voice. "Bergström was hated. Overcharged rent, evicted old Mrs. Persson last winter and he was skimming funds from the town's heritage fund. Half of Högafors wanted him dead."

Nils frowned. "That's… actually helpful."

Wilma smirked. "Of course it is. Now, let's talk suspects."

* * * * *

1. Frida the Baker – Bergström had been pressuring her to sell her shop. "I'd never poison a customer!" Frida wailed. Wilma sniffed. "But you did threaten to 'shove him in the oven' last week. I heard you." Frida turned pale.

2. Dr. Edvard Vinter – The town's physician, who owed Bergström a small fortune in gambling debts. "I was at the clinic all morning!" he insisted. Wilma arched a brow. "Funny. Nurse Lisa said you were 'out collecting specimens.' What kind, I wonder?"

3. Young Tomas – Bergström's nephew, set to inherit everything. "I loved my uncle!" he protested. Wilma smiled sweetly. "Then why were you seen arguing over the will yesterday?"

4. Mrs. Persson – The evicted widow, now living with her daughter. "I wouldn't waste good poison on him," she muttered. Wilma nodded approvingly. "Practical. I respect that."

* * * * *

Wilma's knitting needles clicked furiously as she pieced it together.

"It wasn't the kanelbulle," she announced later that evening, barging into Nils' office. "It was the jam."

Nils blinked. "The… jam?"

"Bergström always took extra lingonberry jam. Frida's batch was fine but the jar on his table was new. And who just happened to bring a fresh jar to the bakery this morning?"

Nils' eyes widened. "Tomas. He said it was a 'peace offering.'"

Wilma smirked. "And he knew his uncle's habits. A slow-acting poison in the jam, enough time for an alibi."

* * * * *

They found Tomas at the train station, suitcase in hand.

"Leaving so soon?" Wilma called sweetly.

Tomas froze. "Visiting relatives."

Wilma held up the jam jar. "Forgot your preserves?"

His face twisted. "You meddling old..."

Nils stepped forward. "That's enough."

As Tomas was led away, Wilma sighed in satisfaction. "Another case closed. Really, Nils, what would you do without me?"

Nils groaned. "Live a quieter life."

Wilma patted his arm. “And die of boredom. You’re welcome.”

* * * * *

The next day, Wilma held court at the café, regaling the ladies’ guild with her “brilliant deduction.”

“...and that’s why you should always check the jam,” she finished, sipping her tea triumphantly.

Old Mrs. Persson leaned in. “Wilma… you don’t think Tomas was working alone, do you? I heard...”

Wilma’s eyes gleamed. “Do tell.”

And with that, the knitting needles resumed their furious clicking. ■

THE END

The missing tome
by Thanos Kalamidas
THE missing TOME
THANOS KALAMIDAS
Three crime and mystery stories featuring Constable Karl Blom of the Växjö police station. A unique character with distinctive qualities.
Download for FREE, **HERE!**

Dan is a man in his late 60s, with the steering-wheel-leathery hands and patient eyes of someone who has spent four decades navigating the city's veins and arteries. His taxi, a slightly weathered but impeccably clean sedan, is his mobile confessional. A former history teacher who took to driving after early retirement for the freedom and the pension boost, Dan never lost his love for stories. He doesn't just drive; he listens. He's heard more truths in his rearview mirror than most therapists. A silent nod, a well-timed "mmhmm," and the safe anonymity of the backseat are all the encouragement people need. He carries these stories with him, fragments of a thousand lives, the silent curator of the city's secrets.

The other seat

Dan knew by the way she was tugging at her carry-on strap, like it was a disobedient dog, that she was new in town. Airports churned people out in two modes: the glassy-eyed, ready-for-bed types, and the jangly bright ones, their blood fizzing with reunion fantasies. She was the second.

"Cab?" Dan said, leaning across to push the passenger door open. His car smelled faintly of old fries and the vanilla tree he'd hung up back in March. He didn't apologize anymore for the smell. People got what they got.

"Yes, please!" she said, sliding in. She was maybe twenty-eight, with that particular messy bun that declared, I don't care but had in fact taken considerable strategy.

"Where to?" Dan asked, adjusting his meter, which still sometimes stuck like a stubborn child refusing to eat peas.

She hesitated, then leaned forward conspiratorially. "So. Funny story. I'm in town to meet my long-lost twin sister."

Dan raised an eyebrow, flicking the blinker. He loved when rides started like this. "Twin sister. That's a new one. Usually it's, you know, 'Take me to the Marriott.'"

"No, I'm serious," she said, fumbling her phone out. "We matched on this DNA testing thing. Total shocker. I was adopted. My parents never told me I had a sister. And now, voilà." She shoved the phone under his nose, screen blazing with the photo of another young woman, same brown hair, same lopsided smile.

Dan squinted. He didn't need to squint, really, he already knew. His gut gave that weird electric jolt, like when you stick a fork too close to a socket.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "That's Jenny."

Her head snapped up. "You know her?"

"Rides with me every couple weeks. Grocery runs, mostly. Likes peanut butter pretzels, sings off-key to Whitney Houston."

The young woman blinked rapidly, as though Dan had just recited her secret family tree. "Oh my God. This is insane. You know her?"

Dan gave a slow nod. "Know her in the limited way a cabbie knows someone. Five-minute chunks. But enough." He paused, then added with professorial flair (old habits died slow), "You're living in the middle of what's known as the picaresque reveal. Sudden discovery of hidden kin. Very 19th century."

She tilted her head. "Were you, like, an English major?"

"History teacher. Retired. But once you spend forty years drilling bored teenagers on the French Revolution, you develop an instinct for narrative drama."

She laughed, nerves bubbling out. "Well, maybe this is my revolution."

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

Traffic thickened on the freeway. The cab hummed with tension and the occasional squeak of the windshield wipers, which Dan had turned on unnecessarily, then forgot about.

"What if she doesn't want to see me?" the young woman asked suddenly, chewing her thumbnail.

"Then you'll still have seen her," Dan said. "There's value in that. Life's made of drive-bys and partial encounters. Sometimes that's all you get."

She studied him like he was a fortune cookie that had spoken back. "Do you always talk like that?"

"Only when I'm caffeinated."

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

They reached the address Jenny usually gave: a squat brick apartment building with the tragic optimism of a place once advertised as "Luxury Living" back in the 70s.

The young woman's eyes went wide. She whispered, "That's her window." She pointed to a second-floor unit with a plant drooping like a green drunk across the sill.

Dan idled the engine. "You want me to wait?"

"Yes. God. Please." She half-ran, half-tripped up the stairs, her suitcase thumping behind her.

Dan stayed, tapping the steering wheel in rhythm to a song

only he knew. He remembered Jenny's laugh, loud, like she was trying to prove she'd earned it. He thought of the younger one's hopeful grin, how it wavered like a candle in a draft. He hoped this wouldn't end with yelling. He had enough yelling in his own past, students, ex-wife, himself in the mirror.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

From the cab, Dan watched the door open upstairs. Jenny appeared, her hair in a towel, a look of practiced suspicion on her face. The younger woman launched into fast talking, hands flying, phone waving, laughter spiking too high.

Jenny froze. Then, with a suddenness that made Dan's chest hurt, Jenny dropped the towel from her head and pulled the young woman in. A hug, messy, desperate, clumsy as two people trying to fold into the same coat.

Dan exhaled. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

Ten minutes later they came down together. The resemblance was uncanny, like some cosmic copy-paste job with minor edits.

"Dan!" Jenny called, grinning. "You knew before I did, huh?"

"Wouldn't say that," Dan replied. "I just drove the car."

The younger woman threw her arms around him impulsively. She smelled like airport perfume and nervous sweat. "Thank you," she said into his jacket.

Dan patted her back awkwardly. “Don’t thank me. Thank whoever invented DNA kits. And maybe Whitney Houston.”

Jenny laughed, nudging her sister. “Come on, let’s order pizza. You’re staying at my place.”

As they walked off, arm in arm, Dan felt the oddest ache, half joy, half emptiness. Like finishing a novel where the characters get the ending they deserve, but you’re left staring at the quiet room.

He turned off the meter, pulled into traffic, and whispered to the empty back seat: “History, in real time.”

Then he drove on, hunting for the next story. ■

The End

Download for FREE, HERE!
RICHARD STANFORD
The Informant
His notebook was full of shorthand transcripts of phone conversations. It had been one of those 'nothing-is-ready-days', panic to deadline, reporters lost in traffic. But they had managed to put the late edition to bed.
The Informant
by Richard Stanford

Last call for integrity

It was raining gin that night. Not water, gin. Burned the soul if you had any left. Me, I ran out years ago. I was sitting at a booth in a dive called The Black Wishbone, nursing a bourbon like it owed me rent. My name's Frank Devereaux. Used to be a detective. Now, just a drunk with a badge.

Across from me, a jukebox wheezed out some forgotten jazz tune. Even the trumpet sounded tired. My trench coat was damp, my gun was loaded, and my liver was throwing in the towel. That's when she walked in, pain in heels, trouble with red lipstick.

"You Frank?" she asked, voice like gravel rolled in honey.

"Depends. You the Grim Reaper or just another unpaid bill?"

She didn't laugh. Just handed me a manila envelope. "It's about your partner. Jack. He's dead."

I looked at the photo. Jack's face. Or what was left of it. His eyes were open but told no stories anymore.

"Damn it, Jack."

He and I had been through hell together. War vets turned cops turned whatever this city turned us into. He was the last decent thing I had. And someone had cut him open like yesterday's fish.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"His sister. Elena."

"Funny. He never mentioned you. But then again, Jack didn't mention the time he got shot and kept chasing a guy with half a lung."

"I need your help," she said. "You're all that's left."

I lit a cigarette. The flame trembled like it knew what was coming.

"You ever drink gin in a thunderstorm, Elena?"

"No."

"Good. Don't start. Where'd they find him?"

* * * * * * *

The morgue was as cold as the city's soul. Doc Harrelson peeled back the sheet and there was Jack. His body looked like someone had played tic-tac-toe with a box cutter.

"Coroner's saying suicide," Doc said.

I laughed. The kind of laugh that dies before it's born.

"Jack didn't kill himself. He wouldn't even eat sushi. Said it looked like bait. Suicide? No. This was a message."

"A message to who?"

"Me."

* * * * * * *

I started digging. Old cases. Favors owed. People who still remembered the name Devereaux without spitting after. A few names bubbled up, low-level slugs, high-level thugs. One name stood out.

Victor Marcone.

Jack and I put his brother away five years ago. The kind of guy who'd skin a priest if it meant a payday. Rumor was Victor had been rebuilding, silently, in the cracks of the city. And now he wanted a housewarming gift.

* * * * * * *

I found Victor in a speakeasy disguised as a laundromat. Nothing cleaner than a criminal's shirt. He was sipping a martini, pinky out like a goddamn French duke.

"Frank," he said, all crocodile charm. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You killed Jack."

He smiled. That snake kind of smile that slithers into your gut.

"Prove it."

"You wear cologne, Vic?"

He raised a brow. "Sandalwood. Why?"

"Because Jack reeked of it. His corpse smelled like a goddamn lumberjack's cologne ad. You were there."

Victor stood, slow. His goons shifted like dogs with an itch.

"You're drunk."

"Always. Makes me unpredictable."

"You think you're gonna make it out of here?"

I pulled the .38 from under my coat and shot his two goons before he could blink. The shots echoed like judgment day in a coffin.

Victor froze. I walked up, jammed the barrel under his chin.

"You don't get to walk away clean, Victor."

"You gonna shoot me? In cold blood?"

"No. In warm hate."

I pulled the trigger. Click.

Empty.

Victor laughed.

"Out of bullets, Frank?"

"No. Just out of reasons to keep the law."

I pistol-whipped him, hard. He fell like a tree in a lonely forest. The kind nobody hears.

* * * * * * *

I dragged his unconscious body to the station. Threw him in the lobby like a trophy.

"Put him on trial," I told the rookie on duty. "You've got enough dirt under his nails to build a city."

He stared at me. "You're Devereaux, right? Thought you were dead."

"I was. But death's boring."

* * * * * * *

Later, I sat on the rooftop of my building, sipping the same bourbon that had kept me warm all these years. Elena stood beside me.

"You did it," she said. "Why turn him in? Could've shot him."

I looked out over the city.

"Because Jack wouldn't have. He was the last good man I knew. Didn't deserve to die in a puddle of blood and sandalwood."

"You think it'll change anything?"

"No. But it means something to me. And these days, that's enough."

She kissed me on the cheek. The kind of kiss that's more goodbye than hello.

As she walked off, I lit another cigarette. The city below blinked like a tired eye. Somewhere, justice got one more breath. And I got one less. ■

Fin

His future existence
depends on your
present presence.

Dust and Honour

The rain didn't care about museum schedules. It hammered the skylights of the National Archaeological Museum like a drunk pianist with a grudge, sloppy, erratic, and full of menace. The marble floors below reflected the chaotic rhythm in pale, watery veins, turning the grand hall into something both majestic and vaguely funereal.

Inside, the museum slept uneasily under flickering fluorescent lights and the hum of tired HVAC systems. Most of the patrons had long since gone, driven out by the closing bell and the promise of hot soup or warm beds. Only the guards remained, two men in polyester uniforms and orthopaedic shoes, sipping third-rate coffee that tasted like rust and punishment. They sat in the security office watching grainy camera feeds with the glazed eyes of men who hadn't believed in miracles or criminals with flair, for years.

At 2:03 a.m., the lights cut out.

Not a flicker. Not a warning. One moment the world existed in pixels and soft white light. The next ...it was gone. A blackout. Total and surgical.

"Generator'll kick in," muttered one guard, tapping his flashlight like it owed him money. "Always does."

Three minutes passed.

Three minutes of darkness.

That was all it took.

In those 180 seconds, something ancient and priceless ceased to exist, at least, to the museum's inventory system.

When the emergency lights buzzed back on in a dull, yellow haze, the room seemed the same at first glance. The cameras clicked back to life with mechanical indifference. But as the guards returned to their rounds, one of them stopped in his tracks beneath the west dome.

"Hey," he whispered. Then louder: "Hey! The mask..."

The Mask of Eleutherios was gone.

Gone.

The glass case stood untouched. No alarms had triggered. No motion sensors blinked. But the pedestal, oh, the pedestal was empty. Only a faint, cloying trace of sandalwood perfume lingered in the air, an invisible calling card that whispered of rituals and smoke-drenched orgies long buried by dust and polite academic silence.

By 3:15 a.m., the museum director had been called from his bed, where he'd been dreaming of grant approvals and committee honours. He arrived pale, balding, and wrapped in a bathrobe with the institution's emblem embroidered over his heart like a target. Upon seeing the empty display, he turned on his heel, muttered something about "insurance nightmares," and promptly fainted into a potted fern shaped like Athena's owl.

By dawn, the press had caught wind. They camped outside the museum gates with long lenses and longer questions.

"Priceless Artefact Vanishes!"

"Heist in the Heart of Athens!"

"Was It an Inside Job?"

The public devoured the story with the same grim delight they reserved for scandals involving royalty or baklava shortages.

And in a creaky fifth-floor walk-up on the edge of Exarcheia, where revolution always flirted with disrepair, Mary Danforth stood barefoot on her tile floor, hurling darts at a photo of the very same museum director now nursing a sprained ego and a bruised spleen.

The photo was old, taped to the cracked plaster above her radiator. His face was smug; the kind of expression men wore when they were telling you, very gently, to leave your keys and your dignity at the front desk on the way out. He'd fired her five years ago, after one bad dig, one questionable call, and one bar fight in Cairo she still claimed was "academic discourse, with fists."

Now, the Mask of Eleutherios was gone.

And so was her second chance.

She stared at the latest headline glowing on her ancient laptop. There it was, the artefact she'd spent seven years researching, five defending, and two being publicly discredited over, stolen like a page out of a pulp novel. Dionysian rites, they used to call it. Madness. Liberation. Secrets carved into gold.

Mary took a long sip of her lukewarm whiskey and muttered:

"Guess someone finally believed me."

She dug her satchel out from beneath the bed, tossed in her boots, a revolver wrapped in a silk scarf, and a notebook already half-full of leads and grudges. The city outside her window pulsed with horns and thunder.

History had been stolen. Again.

And this time, she wasn't going to watch from the sidelines.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

The old Venetian warehouse crouched at the edge of the Thessaloniki docks like a drunk with secrets. It was the kind of place you passed without turning your head, unless you owed someone money, or you were looking for trouble. Mary Danforth was doing both.

Her boots squelched through oil and rainwater as she moved between the stacked crates. Ted Garrison followed close behind, gun drawn, trench coat flaring like a noir cliché on its last tour. Above them, gulls screamed like dying alarms, and the sea slapped the concrete like it was trying to drown the city out of spite.

"You sure this is the place?" Ted asked.

Mary gave him a side glance. "No. But the guy who gave me the tip had a knife in his spleen. People tend to be honest at that point."

"And what if it's a trap?"

She smiled without warmth. "Then we improvise. Like jazz. Except with more bullets."

They ducked beneath a rusted chain and slid through a half-cracked cargo door. Inside, the warehouse opened like a cathedral of shadows. Dust motes floated in the slanted light. Crates stacked ten high formed a maze of smuggled history, Persian idols, Babylonian tablets, and somewhere, the golden Mask of Eleutherios, wrapped in a velvet shroud and lies.

Voices echoed ahead.

Kostas Demetriou, wearing his usual suit like he was born to launder money in it, stood over the mask, flanked by two hired muscles. One of them held a silenced pistol. The other had the dead-eyed look of a man who'd seen too much and regretted none of it.

Mary leaned against a pillar and called out, "Nice warehouse, Kostas. What's the rent on moral bankruptcy these days?"

He didn't flinch. "Danforth. You've got nerve. And an appalling sense of timing."

Ted stepped beside her, gun steady. "We're here for the mask. Hand it over, no one dies."

Kostas smirked. "You brought him again? You two still playing Indiana and the Ex-Cop?"

Mary raised her own revolver, cocked it lazily. "Funny. Keep talking. I'll shoot you just to shut you up."

It went sideways fast after that.

Gunfire erupted like bad jazz, loud, messy, off-beat. Ted dove behind a crate as Mary rolled into the open, shooting with one hand and dragging a tarp with the other. Bullets thudded into wood and ancient ceramics shattered like broken promises.

Kostas's goons fell, one with a scream, the other in eerie silence. Ted got clipped in the shoulder. Mary nailed the silencer with a clean shot and kicked Kostas across the knee, sending him sprawling.

She straddled him, gun to his temple.

"Say 'sandalwood' again," she hissed. "I dare you."

He grunted, winded. "You can't stop it. That mask's got buyers. People with helicopters and diplomatic passports."

Mary smiled like a woman hearing her ex beg in traffic. "Then they'll be waiting a long damn time."

She smashed the butt of her revolver into his face. He crumpled.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

The Next Morning – Temple Hill

Dawn spilled like wine over the ruins outside the city. The sky was a bruised peach, torn at the edges. Mary sat on a low stone wall, staring at the Mask of Eleutherios, now resting in her lap.

Ted stood beside her, shoulder bandaged, eyes on the horizon.

"So," he said. "You gonna give it back to the museum?"

Mary didn't answer at first. The wind tugged at her coat. She looked older in the light, like something unburied.

"I was wrong," she said finally. "Back then. When I said it didn't matter who owned the truth. It does."

Ted lit a cigarette. "That sounds suspiciously like growth."

"Don't get used to it."

He took a drag, watched the smoke curl. "You ever wonder why you and I never worked out?"

She smiled faintly. "Because I like dead things, and you only like broken ones."

He laughed, low and bitter. "Fair."

Silence fell between them. Not uncomfortable. Just final.

Mary ran her fingers across the mask's surface. "They say Eleutherios was a mask worn during Dionysian rites. Freedom through madness. Ecstasy through surrender. I spent ten years chasing it."

"And now?"

"Now," she said softly, "I give it back. And walk away."

Ted watched her for a long time. "You won't stay."

"No," she said. "Too many ghosts in Athens. Too many in me."

He nodded. "Where will you go?"

"Maybe somewhere no one knows my name. Or maybe I'll dig until I hit the bottom of the world."

She stood, slipped the mask into a canvas bag, and handed it to him.

"You give it back. You're the hero now."

He blinked. "Me?"

"You'll get your badge back. Or a book deal. Or at least a free drink."

He took the bag without argument, but his eyes lingered on her.

"You're really going," he said.

She stepped close, touched his face briefly. "We all leave something behind, Ted. Some of us just bury it deeper."

They kissed. Once. Not sweet. Not romantic. Just two people pressing mouths to memory, knowing it was the last time.

Mary turned and walked toward the trees, boots crunching the gravel, coat flapping like the last page of a torn novel. She didn't look back.

Ted stood with the mask in his hand, watching her disappear.

"Goodbye, Danforth," he said quietly. "You magnificent pain in the ass."

* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Sometimes history gets lost. Sometimes it gets stolen. And sometimes, if you're lucky, it finds its way into the right hands before the wrong ones burn the world down.

Mary Danforth didn't want redemption. She wanted the truth. The dusty kind. The dangerous kind. The kind that doesn't sit behind glass but cuts the skin and leaves you bleeding real.

And in the end, that was enough. ■

The end

How a retirement plan got complicated

The man was sweating, though it wasn't the heat that was making his skin slick. It was the pressure; the kind that grips you by the throat and squeezes until you can't breathe. He checked the watch again. His pulse thudded in his ears as the seconds dragged on. He was supposed to meet someone. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

What the hell went wrong?

The alley was dark, narrow, the kind of place where things go wrong and no one hears you scream. But tonight, the shadows weren't his friends. They were his enemies, closing in like a vice. He had a brief moment to think about what came next ...the plan, the consequences, the risks but that was all behind him now. All he could do was wait.

Then, footsteps.

Heavy, deliberate, echoing off the brick walls.

"Don't do anything stupid," the voice said, rough, gritty, like it had been worn down by years of street-corner deals and promises that never meant a damn thing.

He froze, every muscle tensing, but the silence that followed was worse. It was the kind of silence that feels too loud, like a bullet waiting to be fired. The man's hand went to his pocket, fingers brushing the cold steel. He could feel the weight of the money in the bag, but it wasn't the cash that mattered anymore. No, it was the file. The one with everything. The proof, the connections, the damn retirement plan that had become a nightmare. That file could either save his life or end it.

No turning back now.

The footsteps stopped. The man's hand tightened around the gun, his other hand still clutching the bag. The silence stretched, thick like tar.

"Got something for me, huh?" The voice was closer now; just a whisper, but it sent chills down his spine.

The man's breath came in short bursts. He could smell the sweat, the fear. His fingers were slick as he pulled the gun from its holster. The file was in the other hand, a damn reminder of everything that had gone wrong.

"You want the money?" he rasped, his throat dry, his voice almost a croak.

"I want the plan," the voice replied, low and cold. "And if you're holding out on me, we'll have a problem."

A shadow moved in the dark. Then, the sound of a phone ringing. His phone. The man cursed under his breath, but before he could react, the world went black.

Victor paced in his small, windowless room, the thin light from the streetlamp outside casting long shadows across the cluttered table. The file lay open before him, the contents barely visible in the dim light, but he didn't need to see the details. He knew them by heart. He had spent days ...no, weeks, waiting for the perfect moment and now it was here. Every detail had to

be executed with precision, like a chess master setting his pieces for the final checkmate. But even the best plans can be derailed. And he was starting to feel the heat of it now.

The phone had been quiet too long, his nerves starting to itch like a thousand ants crawling under his skin. He picked it up, checking the time again. Still no word. If he had any sense left, he'd already be out of this mess, long gone to a place where the heat wouldn't touch him. But he wasn't that smart. Or maybe, just maybe, the money was too good. And the power? That was irresistible.

A knock at the door shattered the silence.

Victor froze, fingers curling around the grip of his gun, hidden beneath the folds of his jacket. The knock came again, three times, soft but urgent. He didn't answer immediately. His heart thudded, thumping in his chest like a drumbeat. He couldn't let his guard down, not now.

A voice broke through the tension, low, smooth, but with an edge.

"It's me. Open up."

Victor hesitated for a moment longer before moving to the door. With one hand on the doorknob, he glanced through the peephole. The figure on the other side was familiar. Slender, dark hair, the kind of woman who had a way of slipping into a room unnoticed. It was Riley.

His grip on the doorknob tightened. He had no love for detectives. Especially not ones that dug too deep. But Riley was a different breed. She wasn't like the others who came and went, investigating a crime just for the sake of the job. No, she had a drive. And that kind of drive made her dangerous.

Victor opened the door, keeping the gun hidden in the folds of his jacket.

Riley stood in the doorway, her eyes scanning the room, sharp and calculating. She wasn't

surprised. She didn't flinch when she saw him holding the gun so casually. She never did. But there was something in the way she held herself tonight, more tense, more on edge, like a predator about to strike.

"You're late," Victor said, his voice as smooth as oil, but underneath it was a current of tension. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten about me."

Riley didn't smile. She never did. Instead, she stepped inside without waiting for an invitation, her eyes never leaving him.

"I didn't forget you, Victor," she said, her tone even, but there was a bite to it. "But you seem to be underestimating me. I know what you're up to. And this time, I'm not going to let you run the show."

Victor chuckled, a dry sound, and shook his head. "You always think you're the one in control, don't you, Detective?" He leaned back against the table, his eyes locked on hers. "But let me tell you something you've been chasing shadows, Riley. And the truth is, you're too close to the edge. If you're not careful, you'll fall right over."

Her gaze hardened. "You're a piece of work, Victor. But I know you. I know exactly what you've been up to. You're in deeper than you think. The people you've been playing? They're not going to let you walk away."

Victor's lips twitched into a smirk. "Is that supposed to scare me?"

"No," Riley replied, stepping forward, her voice low and dangerous now. "But what you don't realize is that you're already in too deep. The plan you think is foolproof? It's already falling apart. Your partners, your backers ...they're watching you, Victor. And when they see you slipping, they'll come for you."

The words struck him like a blow, but Victor didn't flinch. He was too good to show any weakness, too smart to fall for her tricks. "You think they're coming for me? Please. They're

too busy covering their own asses to worry about me."

Riley smiled, a sharp, predatory smile that sent a chill down his spine. "Not all of them. Some of them know what's at stake, Victor. Some of them are making moves. They're not waiting for you to mess up—they're already moving ahead of you. And I know you don't like being outplayed."

Victor's jaw clenched, but he kept his voice steady. "You don't know anything about it."

"Oh, but I do," Riley said, stepping closer. "I know about the accounts, the laundering, the people involved. And I know about you, Victor. How you've been playing both sides. You've got too many strings attached, too many people who want you gone. And it's only a matter of time before they pull them all tight around your neck."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The air crackled with tension, thick and suffocating. Victor was starting to feel it now, the walls closing in, the noose tightening. But he wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of seeing him sweat.

He took a step toward her, the gun still hidden in his jacket, his voice cold as ice. "You're wasting your time. You think you've got me cornered, Detective? You think I'm going to be your big catch? Let me tell you something. People like me don't get caught. You'll have to do a hell of a lot more than just chase shadows to bring me down."

Riley's eyes locked onto his, unwavering. "You think you've won, Victor? You think you're untouchable? We'll see about that."

The sound of a car screeching to a halt outside interrupted the tension between them. Both of them froze.

"Stay right there," Victor hissed, his hand moving to his jacket again, fingers grazing the cool metal of the gun. He knew what was coming. He could feel it. The game was up.

The door slammed open. Three men stormed into the room, their faces hidden by masks, their guns drawn. Riley stepped back instinctively, her hand going to her own weapon.

Victor smiled grimly. "Told you."

The men moved quickly, their voices low, commanding. "You're done, Victor."

And in that moment, the game changed.

Victor's world was crumbling around him, but he wasn't going down without a fight. He drew his gun, but before he could even aim, one of the men knocked it from his hand. The next thing he knew, his world went black.

As the darkness took over, all he could hear was Riley's voice.

"This is just the beginning, Victor."

And he knew she was right.

* * * * *

Victor's pulse quickened as he stepped into the cold night air, his eyes scanning the street below. The city seemed quieter tonight, the usual hum of life muted under the looming weight of his decisions. He kept his head low, his mind racing with the possibilities and contingencies that had led him here. Everything had been planned and perfectly executed, except for one thing.

Riley.

She had always been a thorn in his side. The detective who wasn't supposed to matter, who had no business digging into things she didn't understand. But she had. And now she was closer than ever to unraveling everything Victor had worked for.

Victor's hands tightened on the steering wheel as he navigated the familiar streets of the city, every corner a reminder of the risk he was taking. He couldn't afford to let her interfere any longer. Not with everything he

had lined up. Not with the power that was within his grasp.

The voice on the phone had been clear, Riley was a threat. A loose end. And loose ends always had to be dealt with.

He arrived at the rundown building that had become his temporary hideout. Its decaying façade mirrored the state of his life, all cracked corners and broken promises. He knew Riley was somewhere in the shadows, her investigative instincts leading her straight to him. She wouldn't stop, not unless he made her.

Victor entered the building, the floorboards creaking under his weight. His boots echoed through the dark, and for a moment, he felt the weight of everything he'd done, the deals, the betrayals, the bodies. They were all going to lead him here. He just hadn't expected her to be so persistent.

He moved toward the back of the building, where his associates were waiting. Two men, faces obscured by shadows, stood by the door. They didn't speak as he entered. Victor didn't need words, —they understood the mission. He pulled a thick envelope from his coat, handing it to the taller of the two.

"Everything's in place," he said, his voice steady but carrying the weight of finality. "The plan's gone off without a hitch. You know what to do."

The man nodded, slipping the envelope into his jacket with a practiced motion. "We'll take care of it. You just focus on the detective."

Victor didn't answer right away. His thoughts lingered on Riley. She wasn't like the others. She was too smart, too damn stubborn. She wouldn't fall for the usual tricks, the easy traps. This wasn't a game anymore; it was a matter of survival.

Victor turned to the window, peering out into the night. His reflection stared back at him, a man who had come so far, only to find himself at the mercy of

someone he had underestimated.

"She's getting too close," Victor muttered under his breath. "I'll have to end it before it gets worse."

With a decisive nod, he pulled the gun from his coat and checked the chamber. The cold steel in his hand felt familiar, like an old friend. It was the tool of his trade, his ultimate insurance. And tonight, it would serve its purpose.

* * * * *

Hours later, Victor sat in the dimly lit diner, watching the clock tick toward midnight. The place was nearly empty, just a few scattered souls nursing their last cups of coffee. He wasn't here for comfort, though. He wasn't here for anything except business.

The door opened, the bell above it chiming softly as Riley entered. She was dressed in her usual no-nonsense attire, dark pants, a long jacket, her hair tied back in a way that said she was always prepared for a fight. Her eyes scanned the diner, landing on him with a mixture of suspicion and determination.

Victor stood slowly, letting his gaze linger on her for just a moment too long. He could see the doubt in her eyes, the suspicion. She had questions, too many questions. And he was going to make sure she didn't get any answers.

"Detective," he said, his voice smooth but laced with an edge. "What brings you here tonight?"

Riley didn't flinch, didn't blink. She was playing this game, too.

"You know why I'm here," she said, walking toward him. Her voice was low, but Victor could hear the tension in it. "I'm not leaving until you tell me everything."

Victor's smile never faltered. "You've been asking the wrong

questions, Riley. You should have backed off when you had the chance."

She took a seat across from him, leaning forward, eyes never leaving his. "I don't think I have a choice. Not anymore."

"You think you can stop me?" Victor asked, his tone mocking. "You're just one person. One detective. What makes you think you can take down someone like me?"

Riley's eyes narrowed, but there was no fear in them. Just determination. "Because I know what you're up to, Victor. I know about the plan. The deal. The people you've been working with."

Victor's heart skipped a beat, but he hid it behind a mask of calm. He couldn't let her see that she was onto him. "You don't know anything. You're chasing shadows, Riley. And it's going to get you killed."

Her gaze softened for a moment, as if pitying him. "You really think you can walk away from this? From everything you've done? You can't just disappear, Victor."

The words hit him harder than he expected, a sharp reminder of the cost of his actions. But he couldn't let her win. Not now. Not when everything was about to come together.

Victor leaned back in his chair, his hand brushing the pocket of his coat. He wasn't going to make the first move. No, he wanted her to feel like she had the upper hand. He wanted her to believe she could take him down before he ended it all.

But as Riley leaned closer, her hand moving toward her gun, the door to the diner swung open with a deafening crash.

Victor didn't hesitate. He pulled the trigger, and the world around him went into chaos.

The bullet hit Riley square in the chest. She staggered back,

her eyes wide with shock. The gun in her hand fell to the floor with a dull thud.

Victor's heart hammered in his chest, but he didn't let up. He was already moving toward the exit, his mind racing. He had to get out. He had to disappear before anyone realized what he'd done. But as he reached the door, something caught his eye.

Riley wasn't dead. Not yet.

Her fingers twitched on the floor, reaching for her gun. She was still alive, still fighting, even as blood pooled around her.

Victor stepped back, his breath catching in his throat.

And then he saw it ...the look in her eyes, the realization that she had outplayed him. That she knew this moment was coming, even if he didn't.

With a final, strained breath, she managed to whisper, "You'll never get away with this, Victor."

Victor paused, his gun still raised, his thoughts swirling. But it was too late. He had already crossed the line.

And now, he was the one who was being hunted.

With Riley's dying words echoing in his ears, he fled into the night, unsure if he was running from the law, from his enemies… or from himself. ■

THE END

THERE
ARE
MANY
FORMS
OF
SLAVERY.
HUMAN TRAFFICKING
HAPPENS HERE AND
NOW!

The Last Passage

The fog clung to the harbor like a shroud, thick and damp, swallowing the world whole. The kind of fog that made Stockholm feel like it was sinking into its own dark past. The air smelled like salt and diesel, the bitter tang of the sea mixing with the city's exhaust, a mix you got used to if you spent enough time by the water. But tonight, that smell was different. It stung, like something was wrong.

Arvid Lund stood at the end of the dock, watching the ferry slip out into the blackness, its headlights casting a thin, dim glow that disappeared the moment the boat turned into the fog. The sound of the engines was muffled now, swallowed by the mist, and with it, all the noise of the city beyond.

Lund's hands were shoved deep into his coat pockets, his cigarette burning low in his fingers. He'd been watching the boat for what felt like hours, long enough for the wind to turn cold and the night to settle on his shoulders like a weight.

He should've left, gone back to the office, let the police take care of things. After all, what did a private investigator have to do with a ferry leaving Stockholm

harbor? But something didn't sit right. It wasn't the fog, or the silence, or even the long night ahead of him, it was the feeling that the city was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. And Lund knew better than to ignore that feeling.

The ferry had just started its journey, its engine growling low in the distance, when Lund noticed the movement at the far end of the deck. At first, he thought it was a trick of the fog, a shadow that didn't belong, but then he saw it more clearly. A man. Slumped against the railing, his back to the water.

The first thing Lund noticed was the way he was sitting. Not relaxed, not at all. The way his body sagged, almost boneless, like he had collapsed there from sheer exhaustion. But when the man's head tipped to the side, exposing the bloodstained collar of his jacket, Lund knew. He didn't need to get any closer.

The man was dead.

Lund's heart skipped a beat, and the cigarette he'd been holding between his fingers dropped to the ground. His boots echoed too loud on the wooden planks as he made his way toward the gangway, but there was no one else around to hear. It didn't matter. Nothing ever mattered until it was too late.

The man's name hit him like a punch to the gut. Viktor Holmström. City councilman, all-around sleaze, known for his deals in the shadows, his ties to underground gambling, and a list of debts that would choke the city if anyone ever bothered to air them out. A man who moved in circles no one asked about. Until now.

Lund's pulse quickened as he reached the deck. He knew the guy. Everyone knew the guy. But what was he doing here? Who would want to kill him on a ferry at midnight, right in the middle of the fog?

Lund stepped lightly, careful not to leave a trace. A shadow

among shadows, his movements sharp and deliberate. When he finally reached the body, he stopped short, just a few feet away. He could feel the weight of the night pressing in, making his chest tight.

Holmström's face was pale, the usual sneer gone, replaced by the cold finality of death. Two clean shots. One to the heart, the other to the back of the head. Execution-style. The kind of hit that was more about sending a message than anything else. A warning. Or a promise.

Lund crouched, inspecting the body without touching it. No sign of a struggle. No marks on his hands. Whoever did this had caught him off guard, taken him out without a fight. Holmström had known something, Lund was sure of it. The kind of thing that got you killed if you weren't careful. And Holmström had been careless.

He straightened up, looking around the deck. The fog was thickening; the kind of thick that made it feel like the world was closing in on itself. He didn't like it. Didn't like being alone out here, with a body and no answers.

He turned, his eyes scanning the water as the ferry continued to drift away into the dark.

The cold, salty wind cut through his coat, and the distant sound of the city seemed farther away now, muffled by the thick blanket of mist.

Lund's thoughts were already racing, piecing together the fragments of a puzzle that was only beginning to take shape. Who had Holmström been meeting? What had he been involved in that was so dangerous it had cost him his life? And who on this ferry was still a player in this twisted game?

Lund reached for his cigarette again, but the pack was empty. He cursed under his breath, grinding the butt out with his heel. He needed answers and fast. Whoever was behind this wouldn't wait long to finish the job.

He looked back toward the distant shore. The city lights flickered weakly through the fog. But for now, the answers weren't in the city. They were out here, on this ferry. Somewhere in the mist. Waiting for him.

He pulled his coat tighter around his shoulders and set off toward the bow, the sound of his footsteps swallowed by the night.

One thing was certain: Viktor Holmström's death was only the beginning.

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Lund didn't sleep. He never did after a case like this. It wasn't the body that kept him awake, though the sight of Viktor Holmström's pale face, slumped against the railing like a discarded cigarette, was enough to make anyone lose sleep. It was the nagging feeling that something wasn't right. And it wasn't just the cold mist that clung to the harbor that night. It was deeper.

The police would do their part, of course. They always did. They'd gather the facts, take the statements, but Lund knew the drill. In a city like Stockholm, it would be weeks before anyone connected the dots between Holmström's ties to the underground gambling world and his sudden, violent death. By the time they did, the trail would be cold, and the guilty would have long since disappeared into the shadows.

But Lund wasn't one for shadows. He never had been. He preferred the harsh light of truth, no matter how ugly. And the truth about Holmström was ugly.

He sat in his small office, the walls too close and the air too thick. The overhead light flickered above him like it had a life of its own, refusing to work in any predictable pattern. The worn-out chair creaked under his weight as he stared at the photo of the dead man in front of him. Holmström. A man with more secrets than anyone should have. A city councilman

with ties to the underworld. The kind of man who got rich off the misery of others.

Lund took a long, slow drag from the cigarette between his fingers and leaned back in his chair, letting the smoke curl up toward the ceiling. He exhaled slowly, his eyes narrowing as the smoke filled the room.

"Guess we're going to need to dig, huh?" Lund muttered to himself, staring at the man's cold, lifeless eyes in the photograph.

He didn't wait for an answer. He never did. The truth was that Lund had a hunch, and it pointed to one place: the club. The one everyone in the city whispered about but no one dared to enter. The Black Lotus. It was a casino, sure, but it was something much darker. A den of corruption, where men like Holmström gambled their souls away, surrounded by whiskey and smoke, and debts that could only be paid with something far worse than money.

Lund knew about the club. Everyone did. But getting in was a different matter. You didn't just walk into The Black Lotus not unless you knew someone.

That's where Mikkel came in. Mikkel was a name people avoided, not because of any fear of physical harm, but because Mikkel had a way of making you feel like you owed him something. You'd walk into a room, and Mikkel would look at you with those dead eyes of his, and you'd feel like he knew everything about you before you said a word.

Lund knew Mikkel didn't have the answers, but he had the right doors to open. And right now, that was all Lund needed.

He stood up, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. It was almost midnight. The city was quieter than usual, the kind of stillness that spoke of bad things waiting just out of sight. The fog outside had turned thicker, like it was crawling in from the sea. Lund grabbed his coat from the hook, his fingers

brushing the rough fabric, and slipped it on, tightening the collar against the cold. He looked down at the picture of Holmström again; his face a mask of smug indifference, as though he had no idea what kind of storm was coming.

"Time to wake the ghosts," Lund muttered under his breath.

* * * * * *

The Black Lotus was tucked away in the city's underbelly, a place where the streets were narrow, and the buildings leaned in too close, like they were trying to keep secrets. The kind of place where the rain never stopped falling, even when the sun was out. The air smelled like old wood and stale smoke.

Lund stepped into the dim light of the alley that led to the club, his footsteps echoing on the wet pavement. He paused in front of a nondescript door, painted black to blend in with the shadows, but Lund knew better. This was the door that opened when you had the right name, the right reputation, or the right amount of money.

He knocked once; short, sharp.

The door opened immediately. No questions, no hesitations. Just the subtle, practiced motion of someone who had been doing this job for far too long. The man who greeted him was tall, built like a wall of concrete, his face hidden in shadow.

"You know the drill, Lund," the bouncer said in a voice thick with disinterest. He didn't look Lund in the eye, just nodded toward the inside of the club.

Lund smiled, the corner of his mouth twitching as he passed the threshold. "It's never the drill that's the problem, is it?" he said, his voice low. "It's the people who think they know it."

The bouncer didn't respond, just let Lund pass by. Inside, the place was a haze of cigarette smoke and low conversations. A jazz band played softly in the corner, but it was the kind of

music that made you feel like you were sinking deeper into something you couldn't escape. The air was thick, like someone had turned the volume of the city's secrets up too high.

Lund scanned the room, his eyes flicking over the familiar faces; men in dark suits who were too busy with their drinks to notice anything going on around them. He didn't see Mikkel right away, but that didn't matter. Mikkel never stayed in one place for too long.

Lund moved toward the back of the room, where the walls were lined with velvet curtains, hiding the parts of the club that most people didn't even know existed. He was almost there when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He didn't turn.

"Lund," came a voice, smooth as oil, "You've got a problem."

Lund didn't need to look. He knew it was Mikkel. Mikkel always spoke like he knew more than anyone, like he was in control of the world and everyone else was just waiting for his next move.

"You always think I have a problem," Lund said, his voice cold but measured.

"Not always," Mikkel replied. "But this time… this time it's different."

Lund turned to face him, finally. Mikkel was dressed in a black suit, his face slick with a layer of sweat that never seemed to fade. His smile was something between a grin and a sneer, like he knew a joke you didn't.

"Holmström's dead," Lund said flatly, not wasting time with pleasantries.

Mikkel raised an eyebrow, like the news was as insignificant as the rain outside. "I know."

"Then you also know the Black Lotus is the last place he was seen alive."

Mikkel's smile faltered, just for a moment, then he recov-

ered. "It's always the last place, isn't it? The question is, why are you here?"

"Because I want answers."

"Answers?" Mikkel leaned in closer, his breath warm against Lund's cheek. "There are answers, but you're not going to like them. And sometimes, it's better to leave things alone."

Lund didn't flinch. "You think I'm just gonna walk away?"

Mikkel's smile was back, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I think you're a man who likes to dig. But there are things you can't unearth."

Lund's gaze hardened. "We'll see about that."

Mikkel chuckled softly. "We will. But be careful, Lund. Some people don't like their secrets exposed."

* * * * * *

As Lund stepped further into the heart of The Black Lotus, the weight of the night seemed to press down harder. The city outside could burn, and he wouldn't care. But in here, in this fog of corruption and lies, he was finally getting closer to the truth. The one that Holmström had died for.

And the one that might just kill him, too.

* * * * * *

The Black Lotus wasn't a place you just walked into. It was a fortress of velvet ropes, low lights, and the kind of people who could make you disappear with a smile. The kind of place where the stakes were high, but the house always won. And Lund wasn't there to lose.

The doorman stood at the entrance like a silent sentinel, his black suit sharp enough to cut glass. His gaze flicked over Lund's face, calculating, as though reading the man for weaknesses. Lund didn't flinch. He wasn't new to the game.

"Can I help you, Mr. Lund?" The doorman's voice was

smooth, polished, like it belonged to someone who had dealt with sharks in suits before. But there was something else in his eyes. A flicker of recognition. Lund had a reputation, and it was catching up with him.

"I'm looking for answers," Lund replied, his voice flat. He slid a worn badge from his coat pocket and let the light catch the tarnished metal. "About Viktor Holmström."

The doorman's smile didn't quite disappear, but it got smaller, more guarded. He stepped aside without a word and gestured for Lund to enter. It was a silent invitation that came with the kind of unspoken promise you'd rather not accept. But Lund wasn't afraid of men like that. He'd dealt with worse. And he wasn't leaving without something to show for it.

The moment he crossed the threshold, the warmth of the room hit him like a punch in the gut. The air was thick with cigar smoke, the kind that clung to your skin and got into your lungs, making everything feel a little more suffocating. The low hum of jazz seeped from hidden speakers, barely audible over the murmur of voices and the clinking of chips against the felt. It was the sound of people pretending to be in control while everything around them was spinning out of their grasp.

Lund didn't waste time soaking it in. He kept his eyes moving, scanning the room for anyone who looked like they could help him. But there were no easy answers here. There never were. The Black Lotus was a casino, sure, but it was more than that. It was a web of lies, a tangle of debts and deals that could get a man killed quicker than you could lose a hand of blackjack.

At the bar, a woman caught his eye. She was perched on the edge of a stool like she owned the place, her platinum blonde hair falling in waves over her shoulders, her lips painted a shade of red that made Lund wonder what else she might be

hiding under that smile. She wasn't just another pretty face in the crowd; Lund's instincts told him she was trouble. The kind of trouble that could cost you everything. Maybe even your life.

He approached, his footsteps quiet on the plush carpet, each one measured. He didn't look at the bartender. He didn't need to. He wasn't there for a drink.

Taking the seat next to her, Lund glanced at her sideways. She didn't look at him, but he could feel her awareness, the way she was sizing him up.

"I hear you know things," Lund said, his voice low, but not enough to be heard over the buzz of the room.

Her lips curled into a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "You could say that."

She didn't look at him then, either, just twirled the stem of her glass between her fingers, her nails perfect and painted. There was something about the way she held herself, an ease that came from knowing too much. She wasn't nervous. She wasn't interested in small talk. She knew why Lund was there.

"You're a sharp one," she said, her voice like velvet, smooth and dangerous. "But the question is do you really want to know what I know?"

Lund leaned in, a slow, deliberate movement that cut through the noise in the room. "I don't have time for games. I'm looking for someone who can tell me about Viktor Holmström."

The woman finally looked at him. Her eyes were the color of storm clouds, cold and unreadable. She studied him for a moment, like she was weighing whether or not to give him the time of day.

"He wasn't the kind of man you found in polite company," she said, her lips curling into something darker. "But then again, neither are you."

Lund didn't flinch. He didn't need to. He'd heard worse. The Black Lotus was built on whispers and backroom deals, and a man who wasn't willing to wade through the filth wasn't a man who could solve a case like this.

"He was connected to more than just the city council, wasn't he?" Lund pressed. "Gambling rings. The underworld. The kind of thing a lot of people prefer to forget."

She laughed, soft and smooth. "You don't forget about Viktor Holmström. You just try to keep him out of your thoughts. But in a place like this?" She paused, her gaze flicking over the room as if she could see through the walls. "In a place like this, you never know who's listening. Or who's watching."

Lund turned his head slowly, his eyes scanning the crowd. Everyone here had a secret. They were all wearing masks, some of them more convincing than others.

"Why did he end up dead on a ferry?" Lund asked, his voice low and sharp. "And why are you so damn eager to talk about it?"

Her smile faded, replaced by something harder, sharper. "Because you're digging, Mr. Lund. And people who dig usually end up getting buried."

Lund wasn't interested in threats. He'd had them all his life. "You didn't answer the question."

The woman's eyes flashed with something, an emotion that Lund couldn't place. Maybe fear. Or maybe something else entirely. But whatever it was, it didn't last long.

"Viktor's dead because he knew too much," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "He had his hands in a lot of pies. And some of those pies were filled with things that people would kill to keep secret."

Lund raised an eyebrow. "And you think I'm not going to be one of those people?"

The woman shrugged, nonchalantly. "If you're smart, you'll walk away. If you're not, well…" She trailed off, as though the words didn't need to be said.

Lund wasn't in the habit of walking away, not when things were getting interesting. "Tell me where I can find the people who put that bullet in his head."

She slid a piece of paper across the bar toward him, the movement slow, deliberate. "Follow the money," she said, her voice almost a purr. "You'll find the answers there. But be careful, Mr. Lund. The house always wins. And this game is rigged."

Lund didn't reach for the paper immediately. He let it sit there for a moment, studying her face. She was dangerous. No doubt about it. But she was also telling the truth. He could feel it.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice sharp.

She smiled again, the same smile that made him want to look away. "I'm just a woman with a drink in her hand and a seat at the table." Her eyes glinted as she stood up, leaving the paper where it lay. "But you're the one with the badge, Mr. Lund. You're the one who gets to play with the big boys now."

Lund watched her walk away, her red dress swishing with each step. She was the kind of woman who could turn a man's head and break his neck if she wanted to.

He reached for the paper, his fingers brushing it, and with it, the real game began.

As the paper unfolded, Lund's mind raced. He had one shot at this. If he played his cards wrong, he might end up with the same fate as Holmström. The city was full of killers, but some of them wore smiles and silk ties.

The house always won.

But not tonight. Not if Lund had anything to say about it.

* * * * * *

The city was a maze of smoke, shadows, and secrets, and the deeper you dug, the harder it was to know which direction to run when everything started crumbling. Arvid Lund had always known that. It was why he never trusted anything or anyone that wasn't already stained in some way. He was a man who'd made peace with the ugliness of the world, because he knew it was the only thing you could count on.

The woman sitting across from him at the low-lit table in the back corner of The Black Lotus, Ingrid, she'd said her name was, wasn't an exception to the rule. She was beautiful, dangerous, and just the right kind of trouble. But that wasn't what kept Lund's focus. It was the way her fingers wrapped around her glass, as though she were preparing to break it at any moment, the way her lips barely moved when she spoke, like each word cost her something. She wasn't just playing the game, she was in it up to her neck, and Lund knew it.

"So, Viktor had a ledger," Lund said, breaking the silence that hung between them. The low hum of jazz was distant, muffled by the weight of the conversation. "A list of names, payments, the kind of thing that gets people killed if it falls into the wrong hands."

Ingrid's eyes flicked to his for a brief moment, then down to her drink. She didn't flinch when he said the word "killed." The city had a way of toughening people up. Viktor had made the mistake of thinking he was too valuable to be taken out. That was the kind of arrogance that led to the cold kiss of a bullet between the eyes.

"You don't know who you're up against, Arvid," she said, her voice low, almost like a whisper, but it carried weight. "You think you can play the hero? That's not the game here."

Lund's hand rested on the edge of the table, his thumb tracing a worn scar on the wood. "I'm not here to play any games. I'm here for answers. I'm here to

find that ledger, and if you know anything about it, Ingrid, now's the time to tell me."

She laughed, soft, bitter, almost like a reflex. Her eyes met his, but there was something in them that made Lund uneasy. Something he hadn't seen before.

"The ledger's already gone, Arvid. Whoever killed Viktor took it," Ingrid said, her words sharp as glass. "And they'll kill anyone who tries to get it back."

Lund took a long breath, letting the weight of her words settle in. He wasn't scared of dying—he'd made peace with that a long time ago—but he knew fear when he saw it. And Ingrid had fear in her eyes now.

"So what's stopping you from telling me everything?" he asked, leaning in, his voice a little rougher than before. "You've been in the game long enough to know what's at stake. You've got something to protect. What is it?"

She closed her eyes briefly, like she was trying to swallow whatever truth she was keeping buried. The seconds stretched, each one heavier than the last.

"There's someone else," she said, almost a whisper. "Someone who wants the ledger more than anyone else. He's the one who called the shots from the shadows, the one who made sure Viktor was eliminated. He's the one who owns the Black Lotus."

Lund's jaw clenched. He'd suspected as much. The casino wasn't just a front for gambling; it was a front for something far darker. Viktor had been a piece of a puzzle, and now that he was gone, Lund was left to pick up the broken pieces.

"Who is he?" Lund demanded, his voice low and dangerous. "Who's pulling the strings?"

Ingrid's lips tightened, but she didn't answer right away. Lund could see her calculating the risk of telling him. He could see the conflict warring inside her,

the kind of conflict that could break a person if they weren't careful.

"You don't want to know, Arvid," she said finally, her voice barely above a murmur. "It's better if you just walk away."

Lund didn't move, his gaze never leaving her face. She was lying, he could tell. There was more to this than she was letting on, and he wasn't going to walk away, not now, not when he was so close to getting answers.

"I'm not leaving until I get the truth," Lund said, his voice hard now, like the steel his bones had been forged from. "Who's he?"

Ingrid's eyes darted around the room, as though checking to make sure they weren't being overheard. When she looked back at Lund, her expression had changed. It wasn't fear anymore. It was something darker, something that made Lund's skin crawl.

"The Devil," she said, her voice flat, devoid of any emotion. "They call him The Devil's Hand."

Lund's stomach twisted, and a cold chill ran down his spine. He'd heard of The Devil's Hand. Everyone had. He was a myth in the criminal underworld, the shadowy figure who controlled everything from politics to the street. Rumors swirled about his power, about how he could make anyone disappear with a word, how he could bend the law to his will, how he could make even the most powerful people in Stockholm kneel at his feet.

But a myth wasn't a man. And myths didn't kill you when you got too close.

"You're saying The Devil's Hand is behind Viktor's death?" Lund asked, his voice tight with disbelief.

Ingrid nodded, her gaze dropping to her glass. "He didn't just want the ledger, Arvid. He wanted the control. The city. Everything Viktor had. The ledger was just the key. And now that

it's gone… I'm afraid it's too late for all of us."

Lund sat back, his mind racing. The Devil's Hand wasn't just a criminal mastermind. He was a ghost, a shadow that no one could touch. A man who had the city in his pocket, pulling strings from behind the scenes. And Viktor had been a pawn in his game.

Lund's eyes flicked to Ingrid, then to the door of the casino. He could feel the weight of the situation pressing down on him like a vise. He'd walked into something bigger than he'd ever imagined, and now, there was no way out. Not unless he was willing to risk everything.

"I'm not afraid of him," Lund said, his voice steady now, like a man who had already made up his mind. "I'll find that ledger. And I'll take him down."

Ingrid looked at him, her expression unreadable. "You think you can? You think you can walk away from this alive?"

Lund stood up slowly, his coat brushing the back of the chair. "I'm not walking away. I'm just getting started."

He turned and walked toward the door, the weight of Ingrid's gaze following him. Behind him, the sounds of the casino swirled, as distant as the world he was about to step into.

The Devil's Hand was waiting. But Lund wasn't afraid. He was going to make sure the hand didn't play the final card. Not this time.

Not while he was still breathing.

* * * * * *

The fog was back, creeping up from the harbor like a specter, suffocating the city in its cool embrace. The streets were quieter now, the whispers of Stockholm's underworld faint echoes fading into the night. But Arvid Lund wasn't done yet. He never was. The game had never been about finding the truth. Not really. It was about survival. And

in that sense, Lund had already lost.

He stood on the dock, hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his coat, his eyes narrowed as he stared at the last ferry leaving the harbor. It was a different ferry this time, smaller, quieter, its lights dimming as it vanished into the thickening fog. The sea had always had a way of swallowing things, of taking the past and burying it beneath the waves.

Lund had dug deep. Too deep, maybe. The ledger was in his hands now, no longer locked in a forgotten vault, but scattered on the cold metal table of his rented room. Names, transactions, and a conspiracy so vast it threatened to tear apart the entire city.

And yet, there was no satisfaction in it. No victory. Just the empty weight of something that couldn't be undone.

He'd followed the trail, one dead end after another. He'd watched as friends turned into enemies, as allies became obstacles. People didn't just disappear when they got too close to the truth. They died. Slowly. Painfully.

Lund's cigarette was burning down to the filter now, the smoke curling in the air like the ghosts of his past mistakes. He flicked it away and exhaled deeply, the chill of the night creeping into his bones.

The truth had always been a slippery thing. It never stayed in one place long enough to be captured. And as for justice… well, that was just a word people used to justify their own mistakes. The city wasn't built on justice. It was built on corruption. On deals made in dark rooms and hands that never quite washed clean.

Lund turned, his eyes scanning the empty dock. There was a figure emerging from the mist, moving silently, like a shadow with a purpose. He didn't need to see the face. He already knew who it was.

The Devil's Hand had always been a rumor, a myth whispered about in alleyways and back rooms, but tonight, Lund saw the truth for what it was. The Hand wasn't a person. It was a force. A network. An invisible power that couldn't be destroyed. It could only be buried, deeper, until the next pawn came along, too naive to realize they were just another piece in the game.

The figure stepped closer, the fog parting as if making way for them. Lund's hand instinctively slid to the gun hidden beneath his coat. He wasn't a hero. Not even close. But there was something about this moment that felt inevitable. He'd seen too many faces, too many deals. Seen too much blood. If tonight was going to be his last, then so be it.

"You still breathing, Arvid?" a voice called out from the mist, low and rough.

Lund's lips twitched into a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"I'm still standing. What's it to you?"

The man, tall and broad-shouldered, took a step forward, his silhouette cutting through the fog like a blade. There was a heaviness in his stride; a weight of authority that made the air feel thinner.

"You've been poking around in places you shouldn't be, Lund," the man said. His voice was familiar... too familiar.

Lund's eyes locked onto his. "I've got the ledger," he said, his voice steady, but there was a nervous edge to it. "I know everything. You can't hide it anymore."

The man smiled, and Lund saw the flash of steel in his teeth. "You think you know everything? You don't know shit, Lund. The ledger, the names, the deals… It's all just paper. What matters is power. You can chase the truth all you want, but in the end, it doesn't matter. Power controls the game. And the game's over."

Lund tensed, his fingers curling around the gun. He was ready, he had to be. But the man wasn't reaching for his own weapon. Instead, he stepped closer, his eyes dark with something that could have been pity. Or amusement.

"You're not going to win this one," the man said quietly. "The city's already been bought. Hell, it was bought before you ever started looking. You're just a broken record, Lund. Stuck in the same groove."

Lund didn't reply. He didn't have to. He'd heard it all before. The same line, spoken by the same type of men. The ones who thought they held the keys to everything. But Lund wasn't about to let anyone make the final move.

Not yet. Not while he was still breathing.

"You made a mistake," Lund said, his voice sharp now, his hand steady on the grip of his gun. "You think you've got it all wrapped up, that you're untouchable. But power's a funny thing, isn't it? It always slips through your fingers when you least expect it."

The man's grin faltered, just for a second. Then he laughed, low and cold, the kind of laugh that didn't warm anything.

"You think you've got me cornered, huh?" he said, drawing a knife from beneath his coat. It glinted in the dim light, sharp and deadly. "You think you can outplay the game? Arvid, you're already too late."

The words hung in the air like a final warning.

Lund didn't move.

The silence stretched between them, the tension thick and suffocating. And then the man lunged.

It happened too fast, one second, Lund was standing there, staring down the barrel of a deadly knife, the next, the man was crumpling to the ground with a look of shock on his face.

The fog swirled, and there, standing behind him, was the figure Lund hadn't seen coming, the shadow that had been watching, waiting. The one who had just solved Lund's final problem.

Lund's heart pounded as he watched the man's life drain away. He wasn't sure if he'd ever get the answers he wanted. But at least, for now, the Devil's Hand had lost a finger.

And maybe, just maybe, there was hope left in the city.

But as the mist rolled in again, swallowing the body whole, Lund knew one thing for sure, somewhere in the darkness, someone else was waiting for their turn. The game would never stop. Not as long as Stockholm kept breathing.

Lund's eyes flickered over the shadowy figures in the fog. His work was never done. And the city's secrets ...its ugly, beautiful secrets, would always be waiting. ■

The End

THERE IS NO EXCUSE FOR ABUSE

THERE IS ALSO NO EXCUSE TO STAY SILENT
YOU MIGHT BE THEIR ONLY CHANCE FOR HELP!

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